Criminalizing Culture:
Black Masculinity in the Era of Mass Incarceration

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Abstract

This independent research seeks to analyze the industrial, cultural, and textual production of Black masculinity in commercial American film, from the Blaxploitation era of the 1970s to the digital present. I examine how the dominant media industry has constructed Blackness for national audiences, and how Black creatives, producers, performers, and audiences have responded to and intervened in these textual constructions and industrial spaces. In considering the cultural and political implications of, and struggles over, these representations, I examine how Blackness in film has intersected with, reinforced, and challenged dominant ideologies and meanings of race in America, as well as entrenched power structures and hierarchies. My research is built upon the theories of social construction, cultivation, and agenda setting, and utilizes a content analysis approach. Thus, my research surveys a range of historical and contemporary media texts of pop culture entertainment in order to track key movements, texts, and figures in the history of mediated Blackness, investigating how it has shifted over time in relation to different industrial configurations and sociopolitical contexts.

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Introduction

The Politics of Representation

"It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation"

– Stuart Hall, *What is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture*

Overview

D. W. Griffith's film, *Birth of the Nation* (1915), presented a post-war America in which Klu Klux Klan members redeemed the South from the threat of freed Blacks and Northern carpetbaggers. The representation of African-Americans in the film, depicted as immoral, inferior "others" who preyed on white women, created anti-Black myths and stereotypes that perpetuated for decades. As historians have noted, the release of the film helped revive the Klu Klux Klan organization after the Civil War. *Birth of A Nation's* "racially charged Jim Crow narrative, coupled with America's heightened anti-immigrant climate, led the Klan to align itself with the movie's success and use it as a recruiting tool" (Clark). By constructing KKK members as valiant white saviors and conceptualizing blacks as criminal and deviant, the film bolstered racist ideologies and attitudes and helped to advance the KKK organization. Clearly, the way in which the media depict and construct Black masculinity has real-world political implications.

Still today, media exerts powerful influences on audiences, as noted in the section below. As such, media sites serve as a key spaces for negotiating cultural meanings of race and reinforcing power structures and hierarchies. While much critical attention has examined the representation of news media and how it has often criminalized and demonized Blackness,

scholarly literature has ignored the ways in which entertainment mediums promote similar racial constructions. This research explores how Blackness is mediated in popular films of the 1970s, 1990s, 2000s, and the present; and how shifting sociopolitical contexts, public perceptions and ideological currents manifest in popular culture. In this research, the rhetoric of popular film serves as a critical site of analysis, providing insights into how Blackness has been constructed over time. This analysis illustrates how Black representation often mirrors popular discourses and reinforces dominant ideologies, which in turn shapes audiences' perceptions and attitudes.

Theoretical Background

Cultivation Theory

The activity that Americans do most, second only to sleeping, is consuming media. In fact, those aged 8 to 18 spend an average of 44.5 hours per week and 6.5 hours daily in front of a computer, television, or game screen (Musharbash). Media is a ubiquitous experience to which almost everyone is exposed. Accounting for so much of Americans' free-time and daily life, there is a significant emphasis on media in American society and culture. In particular, television and other media play a large role as a socializer and as a centralized system of storytelling. Cultivation theory of communication studies contends that media has long-term effects on audiences because it functions as a cradle-to-grave experience.

Cultivation theorists claim that audiences, when exposed to television long-term, gradually adopt TV's cultural assumptions based on constant and repeated messaging. While the worldview presented in television is not necessarily accurate, theorists assert that it is extrapolated and interpreted as reality by the audience. This process is known as "enculturation," or how people learn the dynamic of their surrounding culture and acquire the norms and values

that are deemed necessary to operate within it. In this way, TV teaches and influences our values, beliefs and perceptions. While these norms and values are never directly vocalized, audiences absorb them nonetheless.

Scholars have found that the amount of media exposure is directly correlated to formed conceptions of the world: the more media you consume, the more your perceptions will parallel media messaging. People extrapolate knowledge and assumptions from television through the use of exemplars. They are able to generalize by relying on and referring to examples that already exist in their memory (Tversky et al.). Thus, theorists claim, the central mechanism that underlies cultivation theory is repetition. The frequency of exposure to messages causes viewers to make quicker reference to the available examples provided by the media (Alitavoli). Further, when real-life experiences coincide with TV messaging, viewers receive a "double-dose" and are even more likely to be influenced. This effect is known as "resonance"

Counter-intuitively, all television programming generally exposes people to the same messages, no matter the content of the program. Whether you repeatedly watch news programs, reality TV, network dramas, or even live game shows, you are likely receiving a coherent and consistent system of messages over time. The repeated patterns of **who is in power, who is the villain, who is the victim, who is the hero,** etc. are the true, profound effects of television, theorists argue. While viewers consume content, they are also consuming underlying messages which carry latent values and implicit cultural assumptions. Thus, media can change our mental image of others and even influence our perception of ourselves. How much media you consume is more determining that what you watch in shaping these perceptions.

This effect is especially powerful in the consumption of crime. According to one study, crime is 10 times more rampant on the screen than in real life (Gerbner et al., 1994). By the age

of eighteen, people have been witnessed around 200,00 acts of violence and 40,000 murders with average viewing time. Cultivation theorists assert that this routine exposure to violence affects our consciousness and our perception of the real world. Viewers are not able to accurately gauge amounts of real-life crime since the media is so distorted. The high amount of violent content in the American media diet creates a "mean world syndrome where people cannot be trusted and where people are just looking out for themselves" (Lowry et al., 2003). Long-term media exposure cultivates a perception that the world is mean and dangerous and causes heavy viewers to overestimate violence and have more pessimistic attitudes.

Social Construction Theory

Social constructionists believe that humans gather social knowledge through four different sources: personal experience, significant others, social groups and institutions (such as church and education), and the media. The knowledge that is gained from these sources constructs our perception of reality, of which three types exist: experienced reality, symbolic reality, and socially constructed reality. "Experienced reality is the information we receive from everyday interaction and experience within the world" (Alitavoli). Symbolic reality is the knowledge received from outside sources such as peers, institutions, and the media, which encompasses all that is gained without directly experiencing it or witnessing it but is still believed to be true. Socially constructed reality is defined as "the total of internalized, learned expectations derived from our past experiences and information, such as that obtained from media exposure" (Ogles). The sum of knowledge that we gain from these sources allow us to conceptualize reality, even though our direct experience with many phenomena is extremely

limited. Most of what humans understand about the world is gained from information outside of direct experience and mediated through the social construction process.

Media, therefore, acts as an intermediary between the public and the world around us. It synthesizes an infinite amount of information and disseminates ideas in an easily digestible and entertaining format. It helps us to interpret reality, providing meaning and coherence to our lives. Thus, evaluation of social phenomena is not dependent on reality itself, but rather the media's social construction of a pseudo-reality (Lipmann, 1922). This represents the "mental image of an event," according to Walter Lipmann. Social construction theory contends that reality is filtered through frames which provide meaning, rather than the objective nature. Through this framework, scholars assert that social problems are often understood through the eyes of the media; People adopt the point of view that is most congruent with the media's interpretation.

Indeed, mass media has an incredible amount of power in controlling the narrative of social and political phenomenon. Scholars claim that we are all inherently dependent and reliant on the media for information resources (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1982). Thus, the media's most critical asset is information. Through defining the mainstream, the media is able to construct reality based on the topics and events that are covered versus what is excluded. The influence of the media is especially clear when the events are not directly observable or experienced by the population, such as crime. Cohen notes, "the really effective map of the world – that is to say, the operational map of the world – is drawn by the reporter and the editor, not by the cartographer" (Cohen, 1963). Thus, audiences often come to understand institutions such as the criminal justice system through mediated communication rather than direct experience. In this way, media's portrayal shapes our world view and perception.

A limited amount of information about crime is actually derived from personal experience. Only a fraction of individuals will ever directly experience crime, and victimization of violent crime is even less likely. Rather, individuals understand and develop ideas about crime mainly through schemas passed down by institutions such as the media. “For crime and justice, the socially constructed reality will define the conditions, trends, and factors accepted as causes of crime, the behaviors that are seen as criminal, and the criminal justice policies accepted as reasonable and likely to be successful” (Alitavoli). As such, the media wields an incredible amount of power in the distribution of knowledge. The public perception of crime and justice is “largely defined, described, and delimited by media content” (Alitavoli).

Agenda Setting Theory

The theory of agenda-setting states that media attention increases the salience of an issue by heightening the accessibility of information within our consciousness. The media sets the agenda for the public’s attention and controls which issues are regarded as important (Alitavoli). Thus, issues that the media cover most are more likely to resonate with viewers and are likely to appear and remain on the public agenda. Support for this effect is well documented (Mccombs & Shaw). By conducting experiments, researchers found that people attributed greater importance to issues after they had been exposed to them through media programming. Research has effectively demonstrated that “media is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (McCombs & Shaw). In this way, the mass media exerts powerful effects on what the public deems as important problems.

The most notable study of crime agenda-setting by Katherine Beckett analyzes concern for crime with relation to both actual crime rates and the media’s attention to crime. She found that

public perception of crime (as the “Most Important Problem”) parallels the amount of attention that crime-related stories received in the media as opposed to the actual crime rates (Beckett). Thus, people assign greater importance to crime that is witnessed on-screen than in real life. High television news viewership is tightly associated with perceptions of crime seriousness and the amount of crime. The increased attention to violent crime within the media has translated into greater fear for public safety and personal victimization in recent decades.

Framing is known as the second level of agenda-setting. Frames “call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions” (Entman). The framing of an event or problem might change how the public understands and evaluates it. Framing is the selection of an issue dynamic or perspective “in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entmen). The angle of the media framing of a problem provides for certain understandings and significantly impacts public opinion. The media can direct attention to certain aspects of problems or exclude them, which might favor certain groups while silencing others. This, of course, has powerful political implications. The causal stories theory contends that the way stories about social problems are articulated, and what phenomena is said to cause the problem, directly impacts what kind of policy is implemented to address it. Political actors try to negotiate meaning of problems in order to suggest varying solutions. In this regard, media is a powerful tool that can be used to affect change in society.

Bias is a certain kind of framing that consistently represents an issue disproportionately and distorts the actual reality. The reality of crime is consistently distorted by the framing of the media. The media often disproportionately focuses on violent “street crime” rather than white-

collar or non-violent crime. Although homicides only amount to .02% of all index crimes, they constitute 29.9% of all crime stories (Liska et al.) The media also unfairly represents African-Americans as violent criminals. “Blacks are overrepresented as perpetrators of violent crime when news coverage is compared with arrest rates” (Entman & Gross) Also, Blacks are made to appear more threatening in media portrayals. “In a sample of local Chicago TV news from 1993-1994, stories about Blacks were four times more likely to include mug shots [than stories about Whites accused of crimes]. (Entman & Rojecki) Presumably due to cultivation effects, heavy television news viewers are more likely than light viewers to feel emotional discomfort after being exposed to crime stories with Black perpetrator (Dixon, 2005). Also, regardless of media viewership, people are more likely to remember crime stories when the perpetrator was a Black male (Dixon, 2005). It is clear that media activates and reinforces racial stereotypes and offers distorted representations of the reality of crime, which in turn negatively affects the public’s understandings of and attitudes towards Black men.

The collective image and representation of Black male criminality has important effects. “Patterns in portrayals of Black males can be expected to promote exaggerated views related to criminality and violence” (Media). These understandings lead to negative real-world consequences and political implications. For example, “presumably due to cumulative effects of viewing TV news that associates Black males with crime, heavy news viewers in one study were more likely to support the death penalty after viewing crime news stories *that did not even identify the race of the suspects*” (Dixon & Azocar, 2007, p. 229) Thus, exposure to stereotypical African-American characters has negative impacts on beliefs and attitudes towards them, as well as support for punitive policies that are likely to affect them most.

The Power of Popular Culture

In entertainment media as well, these associations are perpetuated. Negative representations of Black masculinity continue to be promoted as entertainment, whether through imagery of Black inferiority or disproportionate representation as violent perpetrators. In a study of music video violence, "compared with United States demographics, Blacks were overrepresented as aggressors and victims, whereas Whites were underrepresented" (Rich et. al). Thus, entertainment mediums such as music videos might be reinforcing stereotypes of aggressive Black masculinity in similar ways as news content. A few scholars have suggested that entertainment media can have similar effects to news media in setting the public agenda and constructing reality. One study found that prime-time crime drama viewership significantly increases concerns about crime (Holbert et al., 2005). Also, entertainment media can lead to political judgements. In an experiment of *Law and Order*, researchers found that positive and negative story lines created different perceptions of whether the criminal justice system is fair. Thus, some studies do conclude that entertainment media could affect normative expectations and assumptions about race and criminality.

However, attention to popular media is extremely limited in scholarly literature. This gap in knowledge might be due the conception that entertainment media is undeserving of academic study because it is created to entertain rather to inform or educate. Curran and Sparks explain: "The lack of attention to press entertainment partly stems from the view that it is inherently trivial and unimportant. This view is based on the elitist assumption that most of what people read most of the time does not warrant critical study" (Curran & Sparks).

Yet, there are important reasons we should turn our focus towards popular media as a site of analysis. First, entertainment media comprises the majority of television programming and has

larger viewership than news media. Entertainment is on average the most prevalent source of media in our daily lives. The sheer amount of entertainment media that we are exposed to is a testament to its potential for influence. Also, we consume entertainment media more than ever before. In the book "Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality," Neal Gabler argues that reality is increasingly ordered and aestheticized as narratives of entertainment. (Gabler). Neil Postman echoes this sentiment in the book "Amusing Ourselves to Death" (Postman). He claims that we have transitioned from the "Age of Exposition" to the "Age of Show Business," in which television news has been distorted by entertainment. The importance of entertainment in our lives, and the American cultural identity at-large, cannot be understated.

Also, the same psychological effects at play in news agenda-setting should still apply to entertainment media. If news media increases issue salience through accessibility, entertainment media should also create accessible information which we can rely on. In fact, some theorists even assert that audiences are more likely to adopt messages through entertainment media than news media. Scholars suggest that as audiences consume entertainment media, they discount the political and social messages, which over time influences their attitudes more. Since people are less likely to scrutinize an argument if it is presented as entertainment, they are less likely to expend cognitive energy to make counter-arguments and inevitably accept the messaging that is embedded in the cultural product. So, because viewers are more likely to process entertainment content heuristically rather than systematically, they are more likely to experience cultivation effects. Therefore, although popular culture is produced merely to entertain and attract large audiences, it also helps individuals to contextualize and understand the world around them.

Film influences political judgements and attitudes in specific ways as well. The narrative structure of film is compatible with the way our brains process information, which provides for

more empathetic and memorable reactions. We understand film as a realistic, authentic depiction of the world. Through analysis of the relationship between movies and opinions, Blumer states: "One can see rather clearly the role of motion pictures in forming conceptions of the world in their stereotyped treatment of different people, different occupations, and different forms of life. In depicting villains, heroes, gangsters, nationalities, life of the rich, war, and other subjects, motion pictures may determine how people visualize these things" (Blumer). The film industry acts as a cultural gatekeeper in controlling narratives and representations. Black film, therefore, "does not escape such representational political economies of opposition and hegemonies; rather, it manifests their complicated dialogic encounters" (Hall).

Methodology

This independent research is built upon the survey of research and literature presented above. Through an analysis of the rhetoric of popular culture, this study examines the relationship between Black masculinity and criminality in film representation. As such, this research uses a content analysis approach to critically examine the industrial, cultural, and textual production of Blackness in commercial American film and evaluate how it reinforces and challenges dominant ideologies and meanings of race and criminality. In the first chapter, I will examine the Blaxploitation film cycle of the 1970s, in which Blackness was portrayed to mainstream, White audiences for the very first time. Next, I will focus on the Ghetto Action film cycle of the 1990s and the accompanying music cycle of Ghetto rap. In the third chapter, I will analyze the White savior genre of the 2000s and the post-Obama era. In the final chapter, I will explore the sociopolitical currents and trends of the digital present, and how industrial contexts influence the production of Blackness in the modern day.

Chapter 1

Blaxploitation

"*All African-American political strategy has been a slow, historical oscillation between two polarities: the impulse to integrate with the system and the urge to separate from it"*

– Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*

The 1960s marked a critical inflection point in which the rights and representation of marginalized groups advanced. Part of these transformations was the entrance of African-American culture into mainstream American life. Up until this era, the filmic Black experience had been primarily relegated to independent productions. The genre had been "othered" by the mainstream media and deemed unsuitable for White audiences. Black and White cinema were essentially segregated into different genres. However, as African-Americans were more fully integrated into American society through the Civil Rights Movement, African-American cinema became included and indoctrinated within mainstream culture. This change in status helped to redefine Blackness and realign African-American cinema within the American film tradition.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s led by Martin Luther King, Jr. evoked an integrationist narrative. Essential to King's message was "nonviolent resistance" and pursuit of inclusion in White society. Through this framework, middle-class Blacks tried to encompass the opposite of what Whites stereotyped them as. "The Black bourgeoisie aspired to a conformist, striving image of the "noble Negro" that mimicked the values of middle-class Whites…for the assimilation and seeming progress of life in the suburbs and the illusory embrace of the dominant culture" (Guerrero).

The top box-office star of the 1960s, Sydney Poiter, epitomized the ideal of Black assimilation. Deemed the "ebony saint" of cinema, Poiter won the Academy Award and Golden Globe for Best Actor in 1974 for the film *Lilies of the Field*. The film centers on his character, Homer Smith, who stumbles upon German-speaking nuns in the Arizona desert and helps them to build a chapel. Poiter also stars in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,* an incredibly popular film, in which he plays a successful Black physician and medical professor named John Prentice. The film narrates the story of an interracial marriage between Prentice and an upper-class White woman. When Prentice's father disapproves of his marriage, John says that his father "thinks of himself as a colored man, I think of myself as a man" Clearly, these films, through Poiter's star persona, helped push a similar integrationist narrative.

According to film theorists, these films can be classified as problem-pictures. "Problem pictures usually present the audience with a communal problem, completely stripped of its social and political context, reduced to a conflict between individuals, sentimentalized and happily resolved at the picture's end" (Guerrero). In this way, *Lilies of the Field, Who's Coming to Dinner*, and other films like it, were a shallow attempt at producing social commentary without really provoking or challenging the long-held status quo. Scholars name this strategy "ideological containment," a method of navigating social and political problems while maintaining the existing social order. "By introducing topical political issues into stable, easily recognized and consumed genres, narratives, and plot structures" Hollywood appeared to explore social and political problems while protecting their image and stymieing insurgency (Guerrero).

Yet, in 1965, the mood shifted. On August 11, 1965 violence erupted in Los Angeles when Marquette Fry, a Black motorist, was pulled over for reckless driving. The confrontation escalated into a physical fight between Frye and the police. Civil unrest followed in the city

which resulted in 34 deaths and over $40 million in property damage. Violence escalated into the late 1960s and culminated in 384 uprisings in 298 cities. The violence in the inner cities marked the turning point of the Civil Rights Movement and highlighted Black people's disillusionment with a system that constantly disadvantaged them while ensuring legal equality on the surface. This united the Black community and garnered a sense of insurgency; an urge to separate from the White society rather than attempting to integrate into it. Also, as coalitions of many marginalized groups were emerging, an overall sense of rebellion and insurrection seemed to mark the end of the decade. The politically charged atmosphere created by the Black power movement, the Vietnam war, second-wave feminism, and the gay rights movement led to the abandonment of many social and cultural norms throughout the decade.

The Watts riots, also known as the Watts Rebellion, certainly illuminated the racial tensions and anxieties that had been festering for decades. Many in the Black community believed the rioters were taking part in an "uprising against an oppressive system" In a 1966 essay, Black civil rights activist Bayard Rustin wrote: "The whole point of the outbreak in Watts was that it marked the first major rebellion of Negroes against their own masochism and was carried on with the express purpose of asserting that they would no longer quietly submit to the deprivation of slum life" (Rustin). Thus, the rebellion represented a revolt against the systemic discrimination and racism towards African-Americans that had been carried out in the inner cities for years.

Thus, by the end of the 60s, Poiter's saintly image had lost currency within the Black community. Following the riots, African-American audiences grew disconnected to the images that had circulated earlier in the decade and felt "dissatisfied with the exhausted Black bourgeois paradigm of upward mobility through assimilation" (Guerrero). The Black community was

increasingly alienated by these depictions as there was less interest in conforming to White values and traditions. These representations did not align with the new sense of Black identity and the anger, frustration and tension growing within the Black community. Thus, sentiments shifted towards cultural separation and Black nationalism.

By the late 1960s, the Black community began to associate more strongly with the Black Power movement, which sought to empower Black people and embrace Black culture. Black Power emphasized racial pride, identity and self-determination rather than integration. Advocates for the Black Power Movement were noticeably more militant than the Civil Rights Movement activists and worked to pursue equality and justice "through any means necessary" African-Americans "started to identify the Black experience with the defiant images and culture of the ghetto and its hustling street life" and wanted to see such images portrayed on-screen (Guerrero).

Rising political and social consciousness within the Black community led to advocacy for more realistic, multidimensional depictions of Blackness. Black audiences voiced dissatisfaction with Hollywood's persistent degradation of Black people and started to demand higher expectations. Consequently, ebony saint narratives were largely abandoned "in favor of more assertive and multidimensional Black characters, as well as Black-focused themed and narratives" (Guerrero). Black audiences called for a hero that would depict masculine bravado and aggressiveness and could triumph against White dominant culture. Many of these films were set up as confrontations between the Black militant figure and "the man" "The man" clearly represented White authority and the existing racial order.

The film industry saw a demand for cinematic Black heroes and exploited that need for profit. Blacks had long been denied politically charged, assertive, and violent roles. "The formation of the blaxploitation cycle was tied to its ability to and exploit images that were absent

from mainstream Hollywood productions – namely, images of defiant, sexualized, African-American heroes living in contemporary urban milieu" (Klein). Hollywood responded to these stimuli and began to rapidly produce Black films. The amount of Black films tripled from six in 1969 to eighteen in 1971. Hollywood's revived attention to Black oriented products incited the Blaxploitation film cycle that dominated for several years. These films "tapped into the tropes of Black nationalism, which had a strong currency in the urban centers where the film was marketed" and were extremely salient within Black communities (Guerrero). In this way, the film industry exploited the racialized fears and anxieties of the 1960s to produce the Blaxploitation film cycle.

Prior to the to the decade, Hollywood had comfortably relied on a universal marketing audience. However, with the increasing reliance on television in the 1960s, film no longer controlled the entertainment market. Also, moviegoing audiences became increasingly splintered by race and class due to White flight to the suburbs. As Whites abandoned the inner-city areas that housed movie theaters, minorities were funneled into these urban centers, in which a system of de facto segregation maintained the rigid boundaries. Thus, African-Americans began to represent a disproportionate fraction of the film audience. During this time, it is "estimated that African-Americans accounted for 30 percent of the audience of major city movie theaters, while only amounting to 10 to 15 percent of the entire population" (Guerrero).

Due to these factors, mounting financial distress began to threaten the film industry's viability. "A significant index of the 1968 through 1972 crisis, the film industry had watched its average weekly box office sink to the lowest mark ever, $15.8 million in 1971, compared to a post-World War II high of $90 million" (Guerrero). The major studios were "losing between $15 and $145 million and Columbia and Fox were tottering on the edge of bankruptcy" (Guerrero).

The industry desperately needed to shift strategy and abandon its usual methods. So, when the industry was threatened by financial collapse, it turned to Black audiences and started to produce Blaxploitation films.

The rising popularity of television also predicated the Blaxploitation cycle because it advanced the issues of Civil Rights and the Black Power movement on screen. The imagery of Black militancy saturated television news programming during this era and became the hegemonic construction of Blackness. Hollywood therefore came to adopt these themes and characters. So, only when the industry was faced with political, social and economic incentives to act did they decide to abandon the status-quo. The film industry realized that they could no longer afford to cater to solely White audiences. Thus, cultural, political and economic factors coalesced to form the Blaxploitation narrative and "connote a definition of Blackness – persecution by the state, rebellion against racist institutions, and aggressive masculinity- that would draw contemporary African-American audiences into theaters"

The blaxploitation movement first came into focus in 1971 with the premiere of *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song*. The success of this self-made film garnered much attention from Hollywood and proved that African-American centered films could be marketable productions. Van Peebles financed the film independently, wrote and directed the film, scored the music, and even played the leading role. By 1972, the film had grossed $10 million. *Sweet Sweetback* was notably more anti-White than industry-backed productions and marked a stark transition from the bland, sexless roles of Sidney Poitier to the assertive, hypersexualized, revolutionary heroes of Blaxploitation.

The film tells the story of Sweetback, a Black man who was raised in a Los Angeles brothel and earned his name from a sexual encounter with a prostitute at the age of 10. The

owner of the brothel negotiates with the cops and agrees to let Sweetback fill in for a suspect in a murder trial that has received media attention. On the way to the station, however, the police arrest a Black activist and start to beat him up brutally. Suddenly, Sweetback begins to violently assault the police with a pair of handcuffs. For the rest of the film, Sweetback flees through the city to evade the police and with the help of the Black community, he finally escapes into the Mexican desert. Thus, the film articulates a main feature of the Blaxploitation genre: countering White authority by using violence and Black power. Thus, the film mirrors the Black political awakening and racial unity which the Black Power movement had emphasized.

In contrast, "Gordon Park's *Shaft* (1971) was strictly an industry-backed, moneymaking venture that refined and standardized the conventions of the superspade protagonist first articulated in *Sweet Sweetback*" (Guerrero). It utilized the themes found in *Sweet Sweetback* but smoothed the edges in order to make it more palatable to White studios and audiences. *Shaft* revolves around a private detective named John Shaft who traverses Black and White landscapes of New York City with ease. He negotiates a feud between White and Black mob organization when he is hired to rescue a Black mobster's daughter who is held for ransom by the opposing White Mafia.

Another iconic film of the genre, *Superfly*, stars Youngblood Priest, a cocaine dealer in New York City, who aims to make one last drug deal to finance his retirement and get out of the drug-dealing game for good. The film follows Priest through the inner-city as he encounters drug addicts and corrupt White police officers. Although Priest makes a strong demand to get out, his partner Eddie does not feel the same way. He says, "Eight-track stereo, color TV in every room, and can snort a half a piece of dope every day. That's the American dream!" Also, he claims, it's the only way a Black man can achieve success in a White, racist American society. "I know it's a

rotten game," Eddie says, but "it's the only one The Man left us to play—that's the stone-cold truth" Scholars have noted that the "film's glorification of drug dealers served to subtly critique the Civil Rights Movement's failure to provide better economic opportunities for Black America and that the portrayal of a Black community controlled by drug dealers serves to highlight that the initiatives of the Civil Rights movement were far from fully accomplished" (Diawara).

The films *Superfly* and *Shaft* both helped to crystalize the film movement and define the Blaxploitation formula for years to come. These movies, in response to the emerging Black consciousness of the era, seem to reclaim the anti-Black stereotypes and invert them to make them positive. Black stereotypes of deviance and dangerousness were overturned. Even though Youngblood Priest and John Shaft were criminals who overwhelmingly promoted violence and drug use, they are characterized positively and hero-like. They are applauded for hypersexuality and violence and are respected and feared by others.

The cycle sought to define Black manhood hyperbolically. It used images and messaging to successfully manipulate and construct these characters for commercial consumption. These narratives worked to reconfirm Black stereotypes, not disrupt them. The imagery "presented unrealistic, hyperviolent, hypersexual images of African-American masculinity as realistic representations of the contemporary African-American community, potentially affecting how mainstream society viewed the community" and sending a message that violence is prevalent and glorified within the inner-city.

According to Watkins, "to reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it" (Watkins). The characters are products of racist ideologies and in some ways work to enforce stereotypes, or at least support their prevalence. Blaxploitation movies such as *Superfly* and *Shaft* still represent Black life singularly and limit the full range of Black identity, even though it is

done positively. Youngblood Priest is still a cocaine dealer on the streets of the ghetto, working for his own personal gain. In this way, the movie glorifies the inner-city ghetto life, drug use, and the use of violence. *Superfly* and other blaxploitation films are not revolutionary because they do not change the Black stereotypes in film, but simply reproduce them. Thus, throughout the Blaxploitation period, "Hollywood developed more subtle and masked forms of devaluing African-Americans on the screen" (Guerrero).

This formula was repeated and reworked in endless versions and replications. The demise of the cycle occurred just as quickly as its beginning. Blaxploitation became a public relations liability, as many activist groups criticized the messaging, including the Coalition Against Blaxploitation, Blacks Against Narcotics and Genocide, and Jesse Jackson's People United to Save Humanity. These groups claimed that the blaxploitation cycle, "with its emphasis on pimps, pushers, and prostitutes, was racist, promoting negative stereotypes about the urban African-American community" (Guerrero). The industry was already eager to abandon the cycle and Black audiences had grown tired of the repeating narratives. So, by January 1974, Jet magazine made note of a sharp decline in Black-oriented films, and Variety's weekly survey of the top fifty films declared Black film explosion "a thing of the past" (Guerrero). Paralleling the decline of significance of the Civil Rights Movement, Black representation was largely ignored after the late 1970s, and would not re-emerge into the public consciousness for more than a decade.

Chapter 2

Ghetto Action Film Cycle

"The depoliticizing of politics is evident, in part, in the ways in which the new conservative formations use the electronic technologies of image, sound, and text not only to alter traditional systems of time, space, and history, but also to displace serious political issues to the realm of the aesthetic and the personal. In this context, discourses of style, form, and authenticity are employed to replace questions concerning how power is mobilized by diverse dominant groups to oppress, marginalize, and exploit"

—Henry A. Giroux, *Reclaiming the Social: Pedagogy Resistance, and Politics in Celluloid Culture*

In the early 1990s, rising media attention of the Black urban ghetto in the news and the mounting pressure on Hollywood to increase diversity birthed a new Black film boom after a decade of serious Hollywood neglect. A formulaic and distinct cycle began to emerge and was appropriately named "Ghetto Action" film. These narratives focused on a singular vision of the African-American experience: "the tragic and difficult lives of young African-Americans who are either directly or indirectly involved in a criminal lifestyle" (Klein).

In the early 1990s, the front pages of American newspapers and the nightly news began to broadcast terrifying depictions of the Black inner city. Beginning with the highly publicized rape case of the Central Park jogger in 1989, in which a White woman was allegedly raped by a group of young Black men, "the American public was becoming increasingly concerned about the

relationship between youth, race, inner city crime, drug abuse and poverty" (Klein). The depiction of the urban ghetto in Los Angeles appeared especially violent and brutal when, in 1991, Rodney King, a Black man, was beaten by a crowd of LAPD officers on camera. The acquittal of the officers in subsequent criminal trials incited riots over the course of several days in which 800 buildings were destroyed and over 50 people were killed.

The situation in the L.A. ghettoes had been dire for years. According to scholars, "many African-Americans, particularly young Black men, were excluded both from service and the high-tech industries that were developing in the region, leading to unemployment rates well over 40 percent among Black youth," causing rampant poverty and destitution within the Black communities (Murray & Neal). Also, "the significant demand for crack cocaine and the relative ease with which it could be produced on-site made the crack cocaine trade an attractive alternative to the abject poverty," incorporating many poor Blacks into the networks of the underground drug economy (Murray & Neal). Influenced by the "tough on crime" and "war on drugs" platforms of both the Democratic and Republican parties during this time, the young Black men involved in the rampant drug gangs within L.A. were continually policed and incarcerated en masse.

Some pointed to these phenomena as evidence of cultural deficiency in the Black community, claiming that Black people as a whole suffered from their deviant culture. This theory asserted that Black culture, effectively distinct and aberrant, serves to hinder their progress as a people. This argument, known as the cultural deficiency thesis, claims that African-Americans are plagued by deviant cultural values which enforce their economic immobility and arrested social status. According to this theory, "the problem of the Negro in America is the problem of the Negro men" (Moynihan). Many claimed that the Black family structure, in which

men are mostly or completely absent, is problematic because the family is the main socializing agent of young children. Without male role models in the home, Black youth will not be socialized properly. Promiscuity, excessive masculinity, violence, criminality and irresponsibility will develop and then transmit to the next generation, creating a culture of poverty and continuing a cycle of disadvantage within the Black community.

These discourses and narratives paved the way for the Ghetto Action film cycle. "The immediate danger that is provoked in the White cultural imagination by the dangerous Black body" due to the representations of the news media as well as the dearth of positive Black images drew in mass audiences, both White and Black, to Ghetto Action films (Klein). Their narratives centered on violence, hyper-masculinity, poverty, and tragedy, and demonstrated the quadruple burden of being young, male, poor, and Black. These films promoted the idea that Black people are a violence-prone underclass which express a strong desire to "get out of the hood" by any means necessary. Yet, many characters, constricted by both their environment and culture, remain unable to escape and tragically perish at the hands of either drugs, random violence, or both. These themes became so pervasive within the media that they became the hegemonic portrayals of the Black community.

The economic recession of 1991 was another catalyst of the Ghetto Action film cycle. "In 1991, industry profits dropped by almost 26 percent from the previous year," and in the same year, the industry began to release the first films of the Ghetto Action film cycle, *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz n The Hood* (1991). (Klein). Guided by economic incentives, Hollywood realized that it was time to re-incorporate Blackness onto the big screen. Niche audiences such as urban African-Americans were a profitable market for Hollywood to exploit because movie-goers were disproportionately Black. Also, Hollywood aimed to capitalize of the success of

African-American-directed, African-American-targeted films that earlier productions such as *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) had enjoyed. In order to target Black audiences, these films rejected the conventional African-American characters typically depicted in mainstream films that were palatable to conservative White audiences, and instead focused on creating bold, provocative African-American central characters. Films of the Ghetto Action cycle were especially enticing to African-American audiences who had been neglected in popular culture and were eager to see the "authentic" representations of Blackness on-screen. Additionally, White audiences were driven to experience the spectacle of something "other", exotic, and marginalized from the mainstream. Also, these films catered to the cross-race American appetites of violence and sex and were consequently large box office successes.

After the backlash of the 1970s Blaxploitation films, the film industry aimed to incorporate more authenticity into film production. This new film cycle opened the door to African-American directors and promised to be a corrective to the previous, unrealistic depictions of Blaxploitation. In fact, "in the early 1990s, African-Americans had more directing, writing, and acting opportunities than ever before" (Klein). The director of *Boyz n The Hood*, John Singleton, stated, "So many bad films had been made about Black people, and most of them had been done by people who weren't African-American…I wasn't going to let some fool from Encino direct a movie about living in my neighborhood" (Klein). In fact, he described *Boyz n The Hood* as a "powerful drama depicting the first realistic portrait of what's it's like to be young, Black and American in the 90s" (Klein).

The industry was extremely successful at marketing these films as authentic depictions of Black urban life. Film critics lauded *Boyz n The Hood* as "the most brilliantly executed and fully realized portrait of the coming of age odyssey that Black boys must undertake in the suffocating

conditions of urban decay and civic chaos" (Klein). Yet, while Black directors had more agency in creating representations than ever before, these films were problematic in that they essentialized a singular "authentic" African-American experience. These films claimed to present the reality of living in the urban ghetto, yet, they mostly capitalized on and exploited the fear, tension, and anxiety of the contemporary racial politics. They sought to promote a particular portrayal of the African-American community as threatening and deviant. In these films, "authenticity was treated as synonymous with aggressive masculinity, random violence, and gang culture in general" (Klein). Indeed, by sensationalizing violent imagery and rhetoric which mirrored the narratives of news coverage, these films helped to define urban Black communities as places of danger. The film industry thus exploited a volatile image of young Black audiences in order to promote profits. According to Watkins, "the menacing specter of ghetto youth culture became the exploitive hook that made the production of this particular film cycle timely, sensational and oddly enough, more easily marketable" (Watkins).

The marketing of violence acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Movie theaters that premiered Ghetto Action films were overcome with actual violent outbreaks by patrons. Some claimed that Black audiences were influenced by the violent imagery on-screen and persuaded to imitate the characters' behavior. Yet, the violent incidences mostly occurred *before* the movie premiered, which points to evidence that the content of the movie did not incite violence but rather was encouraged by exploitative movie marketing. Further evidence is seen in the marketing of *New Jack City* by New Line. The production company did not promote the film by using violent imagery or advertising campaigns, and screenings of the film did not generate any real-life violence.

Violence outside movie theaters created a media frenzy that actually drove publicity and increased box-office profits. Amanda Klein, author of "American Film Cycles," claims that this was an intentional marketing tactic. According to Klein, production companies created "calculated promotional campaign to ensure that audiences would associate the film with violence and danger" (Klein). She claims that the production marketing was meant to be inflammatory, so that it would drive people to the box office. She states, "the sensational reception of *Boyz n the Hood* was consciously encouraged by Columbia pictures: such a response added to the film's appeals to authenticity" (Klein). Thus, inciting actual violence was critical to being perceived as authentic.

As a result, audiences began to equivocate the violent African-American males depicted on-screen with the allegedly violent African-American males seated in the movie audience, assuming that the depictions of the Ghetto Action Film Cycle were accurate and real depictions. The films slowly dominated the way Americans viewed the inner-city and African-American urban males. These skewed depictions of Blackness constructed the mainstream White imagination and defined Blackness as an object of fear. The marketing was particularly effective because it mirrored the already dominant, pervasive ideas about Black criminality and fit in neatly with stereotypical images of Blackness. It further incited fear of Black youth, "super-criminals," and came to define criminality as young, poor, male, and Black.

The Ghetto Action film cycle at large, and some of the more successful films of the cycle, *Boyz N the Hood* and *South Central*, presented a narrative in which the poverty, tragedy, and violence of the ghetto can either be entered into through Black masculine reputation or escaped through Black male respectability. In essence, the problems of poverty and violence within the ghetto hinges on Black masculinity. *Boyz N the Hood (1991)* and *South Central (1992),* were

remarkably similar in nature. Both follow the lives of a father and son as they navigate the urban landscape of South Central Los Angeles, "a space believed to be rife with poverty, joblessness, drug abuse, violence and organized gang activity" (Klein). South Central Los Angeles was, in fact, critically important in these narratives. As the site of the violent gang wars between the Bloods and the Crips and the mass brutality of the LAPD highlighted by the beating of Rodney King, "these locations become significant characters," influencing protagonists' decision to commit violence or sell drugs. The only thing that is able to redeem these characters is the influence of a responsible father figure.

In *Boyz n the Hood*, a young boy named Tre is sent to live with his father after misbehaving in school. Tre's mom tells his father, Furious, that she cannot teach him how to "be a man" and therefore he must raise their son. Furious embraces this responsibility fully. In teaching Tre how to "be a man," Furious becomes a dominant patriarchal figure and a strong male role model. He trains Tre to survive the harsh realities of the ghetto and eventually how to escape it. He says, "your little friends across the street don't have anyone to show them what to do...see how they turn out" This implies that a strong father figure is essential to success and escape. He also warns Tre that he must always use a condom because, "any fool with a dick can make a baby, but it takes a real man to raise his children," indicating that masculinity itself derives from the ability to be a responsible and moral parent.

Ultimately Tre chooses the "right" path and avoids a fatal tragedy in which his friend, Doughboy, is shot by an opposing gang. Tre eventually goes to college and thus is effectively freed from the ghetto. In this way, Furious is a respectable Black male figure because he is a "family head who [is] a preeminently successful economic provider as well as a responsible husband and father" (Gordon). He subscribes to the respectable values of hard work and personal

responsibility. He is also "assertive, ambitious, self-reliant, principled, successful at work, and economically viable," advancing the patriarchal notions of what it means to be "a real man" (Gordon). *Boyz N the Hood* imparts on the audience that respectable masculinity is a crucial component of survival and redemption in the ghetto.

On the other hand, in *South Central*, the protagonist Bobby is sent to prison for ten years for a murder conviction, abandoning his almost newborn son Jimmy for most of his childhood. While Bobby is gone, Jimmy is raised by his mother Carole. Carole is addicted to drugs and is often seen hanging out with dealers and other criminals. Jimmy, without a strong male role model and an incompetent mother figure, turns to Bobby's old street gang "The Dueces" Seeking a father figure, Jimmy submits to the leader of the gang named Ray-Ray, his "gang father," and begins to steal car stereos under his command. He is eventually caught and shot in the back. He ends up in a juvenile detention center, yet he escapes to reunite with Ray-Ray once again and reverts to his criminal behavior. Meanwhile in prison, Bobby is influenced by a quasi-father figure of his own. A cell mate named Ali tells him that his absence is to blame for his son's behavior and that he must become a responsible father. Bobby, revolutionized by Ali, exits the prison a changed man, intent on saving his son from "The Deuces" Finally, Bobby rescues Jimmy and prevents him from killing his shooter, thus ending the cycle of violence. The movie ends in a heartwarming embrace of the father and son.

At the beginning, Bobby is portrayed as an irresponsible father figure who dominates others through violence and displays of masculinity. He is a reputational male, engaging in "acts of sexual prowess, rejection of (especially White) authority, gratuitous violence, virtuosity in expressive culture, extraordinary command of language, and living wits and guile" (Gordon). In this way, he is a bad role model and influences Jimmy to turn to crime. However, as he

transforms, he becomes more respectable. He ends "the problem in the Black community" and becomes an active participant in his son's life. In saving him, he proves that the tagline of the movie true: "A child's chance to escape anger and injustice begins with one man, his father"

These representations simultaneously promote and contradict the key ideas found within the cultural deficiency thesis. On one hand, they assert that "reformation is possible only because of male knowledge and love," and that mothers cannot properly raise their sons (Klein). The valorization of father-son relationships and demonization of mother-son relationship insists that female headed Black households are deviant and lead to the poverty, violence, depravation etc. found within the ghetto. On the other hand, these ideas are challenged because Furious, and eventually Bobby as well, rise above their cultural circumstances to become good fathers. In this way, Black men are seen to have agency in a way that is not addressed within the cultural deficiency thesis. As Edmund Gordon notes, "Black males actively create their own varied and resistive meanings and practices out of the material and symbolic resources available to them" (Gordon). Nevertheless, both these representations portray Black masculinity as essential to the country's most enduring problems of poverty, violence, and the systematic injustices that proliferate in the urban ghetto.

By the mid-1990s, the themes of Ghetto Action film no longer resonated with the larger public and production became a financial liability for movie producers. As the productions ceased to be viable profit ventures, the Ghetto Action Film narratives were abandoned abruptly in 1996, just 5 years after they had begun. Backlash from academics later claimed that these representations, coined the "new ghetto aesthetic," were dangerous because they "threatened the viability of other types of mainstream Black cinematic expression" (Klein). Indeed, the representation was hegemonic, but could not possibly account for "the range of social, political

and economic differences that characterize the diverse African-American population" Further, critics claimed, the "spate of violent, stereotypic and inflammatory films gave the summer of 1991 the dubious distinction of launching the second era or Blaxploitation movies," and proved inadequate to articulate the reality of the urban African-American experience. (Klein).

It is critical to note that these themes transcended the films of the decade and proliferated into other mediums such as music. Rap music, popularized in the early 1990s, centered on "angry, antiestablishment lyrics detailing the crime, violence, and desperation of life" in the Black inner city. (Klein). Audiences were attracted to this genre because it "re-created for the listener – in both lyrics and sound effects – the experience of living in the crime-infested neighborhoods" In this way, rap music is similar to the Ghetto Action film because it intended to simulate the African-American urban experience, which was overwhelmingly co-opted by White suburban audiences.

The concerns produced by Ghetto Action films were echoed in the backlash against rap music. Considered deviant, misogynistic, and nihilistic, rap music exacerbated concerns about crime, drug abuse, and rape within the inner city. This phenomenon is known as widening of the net, in which "ambiguous stimuli (such as rap) are roped into the framework of other pressing but unrelated social problems (rape, the drug problem in inner cities) all of which are believed to be signs of a larger social meltdown" (Klein). Thus, by linking crime, African-Americans, and music, rap music became another scapegoat for violence within Black inner cities.

Rap music was notoriously criticized for inciting violence and therefore subject to increased censorship by government entities. Most notably, NWA, a notable '90s gangster rap group, and their hit song "Fuck da Police" were subject to censorship after the FBI and other police agencies claimed that the song incited violence towards law enforcement. "Local police

departments had taken to faxing a version of the song's lyrics from city to city, and since off-duty police officers often double as concert security personnel, promoters found it increasingly difficult to put on N.W.A concerts" (Potts). This song and others like it were effectively censored by means of police and judicial intervention. This intense scrutiny that fell upon rap music is part of "long-standing discourse that considers Black influences a cultural threat to American society" (Perkins). Through censorship, rap music was increasingly linked to violence and used as a proxy for racialized criminality.

Yet, rap music constitutes artistic expression and often mirrors the environment from which it is created. Criminalizing rap music has been a tool to erase, silence, and suppress mostly young, black men and obscure the more nuanced structural roots of violence in the inner city. The violent imagery that rap music has often produced does not incite violence, as is claimed, but rather serves as a mere reflection of the violence already within their communities. "Gangster rap," popularized in the 1990s by artists such as Ice-Cube, Eazy E, Ice-T, etc., usually details the struggles associated with the black urban ghetto: gang violence, racial profiling, substance abuse, mass incarceration, racism, addiction, and police brutality. During the inception of the "gangster rap" genre, these themes were abundantly-experienced real-life events. Urban unrest and racial tension were at an all-time high in major cities following the Rodney King beating in 1991 and the riots that followed. The crack cocaine crisis created war zones, which caused much of the urban bloodshed and violence during this time. Thus, "gangster rap" is more a commentary on black urban life and a backlash against police intervention than an incitement to violence.

The critique of rap music is that it is not "real" art, or even "real" music, but instead represents an expression of immorality, deviance, and crime. Yet, many different genres center around violence, not just rap. "Adolescent and vernacular cultures always have tested the

boundaries of acceptable speech, frequently exploring taboo and transgressive subjects. This is true of 18th-century English and Irish folk practices, the blues of the early 20th century, and rap today" (Rose). Even more pieces of art, movies, and books depict violent imagery and narratives. Yet, these pieces are redeemed by their inherent cultural value. Expressions are often only deemed "valuable" if they comply with White cultural norms.

When the Ghetto Action film cycle was abandoned in 1996, the public began to lose interest with the problems of the Black ghetto at-large, and in turn was no longer exclusively concerned with Black crime and violence. Indeed, there was a "mainstream perception that the situation in the nation's cities was somehow improving" This perception generated a new optimism in the African-American community and shifted the concern away from Black deviance for the moment. Although "drugs, violence, and unemployment continued to plague ghetto communities throughout the late 1990s, the issue lost currency as the perception grew that these were not exclusively Black problems, and that Black youth were no longer without options" (Klein). This marked a transition to more positive representations of Blackness in the 2000s.

Chapter Three

White Saviorism

"In "The Cinematic Racial Order" Norman Denzin writes, "Each decade since 1900 has articulated its own version of the white man's burden" Indeed, the white man's burden is not simply a product of Rudyard Kipling's time. Racial paternalism is alive and well today in films and in many people's imagination"

-Matthew Hughey, *The Significance of White Saviors in a "Postracial" World*

Americans envisioned the new millennium as a more advanced, enlightened future with hope for a better, more equal society. Egalitarian attitudes largely mirrored the shifting of U.S. ethnic demographics. As the racial and ethnic composition of the nation was transformed during the decade, White majorities gradually decreased. In fact, in 2000, California became the second mainland state where Whites represented a minority of the population. Racial boundaries were increasingly blurred with the greater acceptance of interracial marriage and the growing number of people with mixed heritage. Although interracial marriage had been legalized since 1967, the last law officially outlawing these unions was repealed in Alabama in 2000. Between 1980 and 2008, the rate of interracial marriage between Blacks and Whites increased rapidly, even outpacing marriage between Whites and other ethnic groups, including Asians, Hispanics, and American Indians. (Passel). Further, the Census officially recognized the category of mixed race for the first time in 2000, in which 6.8 million or 2.4 percent of the respondents indicated that they belonged to two or more races. Thus, non-Whites and mixed-race people reached an important critical mass through which their presence began to be felt.

As such, many within the U.S. came to openly express progressive racial views and reject the overt racial discrimination and hierarchy of the past. The younger generation, Millennials, espoused even stronger attitudes of tolerance than their older counterparts. Millennial culture embodied a shift away from tradition and the abandonment of conservative social norms writ-large. As millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) grew into adolescence and adulthood in the 2000s, they became the new Hollywood film audience. The millennial audience sought a wide range of film narratives and were more likely to accept and watch films with diverse casts.

While the new ethnic demographics and generational trends undoubtedly played a part in new media representation, the presidential election of a Black man produced a dramatic and sudden shift in the social and cultural landscape. The Democratic primary campaign of 2008 showcased two unprecedented candidates: a woman, Hillary Clinton, and an African-American, Barack Obama. Obama's historic and hugely symbolic presidential victory ignited optimism and hope for the future. People envisioned that the "hope and change" rhetoric that Obama campaigned on would start to materialize. The logic that some employed claimed that if a Black person could attain the highest position of status in America, the presidency, then racism can certainly no longer exist. In this vision, society had reached post-racial era. By qualifying America as post-racial, White supremacy was positioned as a non-issue. While the claims of achieving a post-racial society were always extremely dubious, ultimately, this discourse marked an important moment in race relations and paved the way for colorblind rhetoric that would dominate the decade.

Due to increased visibility of Black celebrity figures such as Obama, the 2000s witnessed the mainstreaming of Black and ethnic culture. "Many American entertainment producers, manufacturers, and advertisers capitalized on this evolution, as reflected in the commodification

of ethnic-inflected fashion, products, and popular culture texts" (Beltran). This trend can also be seen in the ascendance of ethnically ambiguous actors, including mixed race and light-skinned performers of color. Black, urban street culture was overwhelmingly co-opted by White people in many forms. White actors and models started "modifying their appearance to promote an ethnic look, whether by increasing the size of their lips, making their eyes more almond-shaped, or adding curves by inserting implants" (Beltran), It became increasingly apparent that "Blackness (or non-Whiteness) suffers less and less of a discount in the marketplace, while Whiteness commands less and less of a premium" (Beltran).

In an effort to capitalize on the millennial demographic market and shifting cultural trends, Hollywood aimed to reflect the ethnic diversity of its millennial viewers on-screen and personify what these young viewers sought in a filmic hero. New Black protagonists were created that challenged the status quo and redefined the construction of Blackness. Given that notions of heroism, confidence and agency are historically tied to White bodies, the emergence of Black cops, presidents, world saviors, Disney princesses and superheroes onto the screen reflected changing cultural assumptions and ideologies. Non-White, and especially Black figures, gained much greater cultural visibility in Hollywood during the 2000s. To this point, Denzel Washington became the second African-American male to win a Best Actor Oscar in 2000 and Halle Berry became the first African-American female to win for Best Actor in 2000.

Despite the increase of Black representation in popular culture overall and the deterioration of irrefutably racist images of African-Americans on-screen, Black characters were sanitized for mainstream audiences. As a part of this process, films supporting and promoting colorblind ideologies proliferated. An externality of the Obama presidency, "colorblind ideology is based on assumptions that Americans of all groups are now on a level playing field, and

success among Whites in comparison to minority groups is a result of individual determination, a strong work ethic, high moral values, and educational investment, rather than a systematic privilege enjoyed by Whites" (Giroux). Colorblindness refers to a "subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial" form of racism. (Ash). Moreover, colorblind narratives deny the influence of race on inequality and argues that cultural difference, deficiency and individual failures are the cause of racial disparities. Further, this thesis cites particular cultural moments, such as the success of exceptional Black athletes, presidents or other celebrities, or the kindness of Whites towards African-Americans, as proof of the eradication of racism.

Hollywood clearly played into this ideology in the production of White Savior films. White Savior films are the depictions of "a model White lead character who is portrayed as powerful, brave, cordial, kind, firm, and generous, and who takes on a mission to save people of color from their plight" (Giroux). The White hero saves the oppressed Black person from injustice or the dysfunctions of the Black community, or both. This film narrative clearly supports and advances post-racial logic "because it presents Whites as saviors rather than oppressors of those of other races" (Ash). The power and salience of that myth is evident in the sustained success and acclaim of White Savior films over the decade. As film critic James Snead writes, "American films do not merely feature this or that debased Black image or this or that glorified White hero in isolation, but rather they correlate these images in a larger scheme of semiotic valuation" (Snead).

These films were certainly an outgrowth of the post-Obama moment. They were exceptionally popular with White audiences who identified with and idealized the White hero figure. Because they are often marketed as plausible, if not historical, narratives, Whites were made to feel good about themselves. These films essentially eased the "White man's burden" by

promoting ideas about “good Whites” who save helpless Black people. Audiences are freed from White guilt by living vicariously through these heroes in opposition to the bad White villains. Scholars refer to such narratives as "sincere fictions" that absolve Whites of any guilt for the privilege they enjoy. Thus, Hollywood insists on the insertion of these narratives in order that they seem more attractive to White audiences.

These films also promote the idea that individual actors are the cause of and solution to racial inequality. They contrast two different depictions of Whiteness. First, there is usually a racist, ignorant figure who depicts bigoted racial hate and prejudice. However, there also stands a White savior, an enlightened and moralistic hero who saves the person of color from their oppression. Through their salvation, the White person redeems the White race. The emphasis of individual racist actors and saviors sends the message that systematic and institutionally racist structures no longer exist in society.

While the White savior represents the main protagonist, the Black victim is merely a background figure. The White Savior is presented opposite a gentle, passive Black “other” who is grateful to be rescued. Through this positioning, Whiteness is actively contrasted with Blackness. It presents morality as characteristics innate to the White race, and absent in non-Whites. Thus, these movies carry inherent assumptions about racial differences, the disfunction of the Black community and the superiority of Whiteness. The Black character must be constructed within a culture of poverty, violence, and pathology in which there is only salvation through Whiteness or proximity to Whiteness. These films buy into colorblind ideology and reproduce the deeply held beliefs of cultural and moral superiority. As the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) has written, “such cultural racism assumes that people of color are not individuals per se but a collective mass who share a worldview marked by bad values such as a

lack of work ethic or the inability to delay gratification." Thus, these characters serve and protect hegemonic Whiteness in problematic ways.

These films also skillfully express interracial narratives without being explicitly focused on race. They are usually set in all White environments, a strategy that "depicts the African-American experience as devoid of a definable context or politics" (Watkins). Completely absent explicit racial content, these films erase everything that makes these characters Black, other than their skin color of course. Although casts are physically more racially diverse than ever before, race is repeatedly eliminated from the discourse. By neutralizing these social and cultural differences, Hollywood "[undermines] the diversity of those bodies through a laundering, or White washing, of social and cultural specificity" (Watkins). Thus, by implementing casts of visual difference but bypassing cultural and social contexts, these texts fall prey to revisionist, individualist discourses and "ironically illustrate just how far from post-race we actually are" (Watkins).

Further, racial inequality is minimized and downplayed throughout these texts. As White audiences believe that their attitudes have progressed, many are largely disinterested in and outright dismissive of overt race-based discussion. Through eliminating racial discourses, these texts alleviate the fatigue that many express in talking about race. By blaming bad White people rather than a system of institutionalized inequality, audiences can easily ignore the racist laws and organizations that enforce racial hierarchy and maintain white privilege. These narratives obscure the legacy of our racist past and dismiss the actual causes of structural inequality, making it easy for audiences to feel good about Whiteness without addressing the lingering racial inequalities of today.

A hugely popular film of this era, *The Blind Side*, fits neatly into the White Savior trope and colorblind discourse. It was nominated for a Best Picture Oscar in 2008, and Sandra Bullock was awarded Best Actress for her role as Leigh Ann Tuohy. In a semi-biographical portrayal, *The Blind Side* narrates the unbelievable story of Michael Oher, a professional football player, who was able to escape the poverty of the Black ghetto to achieve athletic success and fame. The film details his upbringing in the Memphis projects as well as the development of his relationship with the Tuohy family, a well-to-do White family who adopts Oher and teaches him how to play football.

Even though Michael Oher is supposedly the main character of the story, the film is told from the perspective of Leigh Anne Tuohy, positioning her as the White savior figure. It presents the Tuohy family, and especially Leigh Anne, as essential to Michael's salvation. The film claims that Michael "needed Leigh Anne Tuohy and the rest of the family to provide him with the skills and knowledge for a successful football career to save him from the life of poverty that the film suggests was his only alternative" (Ash). According to Oher's biography, however, Michael actually knew how to play football prior to his introduction to the Tuohys (Oher). In this way, Whiteness is privileged and promoted as the only way to escape poverty. This construction is most evident at the conclusion of the film. As Leigh Anne drops Michael off at his college dorm, she reads:

> I read a story the other day about a boy from the projects. No daddy. In and out of foster care. He'd been killed in a gang fight at Hurt Village. In the last paragraph they talked about his superb athletic skills and how different his life might have been if he hadn't fallen behind and dropped out of school. He was 21 years old the day he died. It was his birthday. That could have been anyone. It could have been my son Michael.

Thus, without the help and support of her family, she asserts, Michael was destined to criminality, violence and even death. The difference in the outcome of these two men is hinged

on their relation to a White savior who can rescue and protect them. This narrative is "based on the belief that Whites must control and direct the behavior of minorities . . . because they cannot take care of themselves" (Ash).

Throughout the film, the White community that the Tuohy's revolve in is heavily contrasted with the Black Memphis ghetto. The film shows Michael's mother, who is addicted to drugs and mostly unconcerned with the parenting of Michael, who was in and out of the foster care system growing up. She says she doesn't know the last time she has seen her son, evidencing her neglect, in contrast to the "fine Christian lady" Leigh Anne Tuohy. She also notes the absence of Michael's father who abandoned the family a week after Michael was born. This scene is certainly meant to showcase the apparent lack of responsibility, neglect, and the scarcity of role models within the Black community.

In reality, Oher stayed with a number of other families before landing at the Tuohy residence, some of whom were Black (Oher). As Oher notes in his autobiography, he had several Black role models who took care of him and supported him which were excluded from the film (Oher). The film "juxtaposes a purported lack of concern from all other adults in Oher's life, particularly members of the Black community - the exclusion of the Franklins is very telling of this - with an immediate and overwhelming concern on the part of Tuohys" (Ash). This exclusion strategically positions Tuohy as the sole person that was willing to help, a fundamental White savior. "To include [black role models] would have diminished the illusion of selfless, friendly White altruism by shining a light on the benevolence of the Black community" (Ash). Ultimately, this film constructs a world in which Whiteness reflects moral virtue and Blackness manifests in violence, turmoil, and poverty.

Another misconception that the film portrayed is that Michael was docile and meek before the Tuoys' "toughened him up" During his first football practice, the coach tells Leigh-Anne, "most kids from bad situations can't wait to be violent, but this kid he acts like he doesn't want to hit anyone" Thus, Michael is portrayed as a gentle giant in the film, which he claimed later on is a false representation (Oher). However, this characterization is an important component of the White Savior film: the sanitization of blackness, "in which the African-American character must be portrayed as non-threatening to reduce fear and superficially challenge racist stereotypes to create an illusion of interracial concord" (Ash).

Notably, this film very seldom even mentions race. As the director states, "[T]o me this wasn't really a movie about race. To me this was a movie about haves and have nots, and nature versus nurture and a kid who had been thrown on the waste heap of society, and how when placed in a family where he's nurtured and loved and a premium is placed on things like education, he succeeds" (Ash). Central to this text is colorblind ideology, that which inequality and disadvantage is thought to result from a lack of values and deficiency rather than race.

Another critical component of this film is that it was marketed as a true story, despite the fact that many scenes were exaggerated, excluded, or outright invented. In actuality, parts of Oher's life that demonstrated the benevolence of people of color were silenced while parts that supported the Tuohys' kindness and generosity were created by the filmmakers. Labelling this film as "authentic" serves to obscure the racialized ideology and divert the audience from thinking critically about its representation, encouraging blind acceptance of its problematic messaging.

While *The Blind Side* was hugely popular during the early days of Obama's presidency in 2008, historical drama films dominated during Obama's second presidential term.

Approximately 150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863 and almost 50 years since the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, the years of 2012-2013 marked an important anniversary. Commemorating these events, a cycle of films was released that payed homage to our racial past. Some films were centered on antebellum chattel slavery while others focused on Jim Crow or the Civil Rights movement. The cycle included titles such as *The Help* (2012) *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Belle* (2013), *The Keeping Room* (2013), *The North Star* (2013), *Something Whispered* (2013), *Tula* (2013), *Savannah* (2012), *Lincoln* (2012), and *Django Unchained* (2012).

These films were born out of the idea that racial progress is linear; an upward trajectory in which we inch closer and closer to complete racial harmony. In this paradigm, we have surpassed the racial hatred of the past and have reached a more progressive state. Therefore, many of these films use historical accounts of slavery, segregation, and other racial pasts to insist our moral progress as a nation. In contrast to these depictions, modern day seems hopeful and tolerant. Thus, racism is reduced into a matter of outdated prejudices and is rendered effectively extinct. By presenting society as authentically egalitarian, largely absent racial prejudice and discrimination, it references racism as "a time long gone, an era of slaves and Klan-style White supremacy that died long before Obama swore his oath to the presidency on Lincoln's Bible" (Hughey).

Like *The Blind Side*, *Django Unchained* was nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award and also received Best Supporting Actor on behalf of the White savior figure, Christoph Waltz. The film also received the award for Best Original Screenplay. In *Django*, Quentin Tarantino tells the fictional story of a freed slave who, once liberated by a German bounty hunter, goes on a White-killing rampage to rescue his enslaved wife and seek revenge against her

oppressors. With gratuitous violence and liberal use of the N word throughout, the film received much criticism. “Slavery is obviously a most serious subject matter and, therefore, presenting it through the playful lens of a White director was perceived by some as outright racist” (Hughey). Nevertheless, *Django Unchained* retained its cultural status.

Although *Django Unchained* was often billed as a Black revenge fantasy, it parallels the White savior genre throughout. Its plot centers on a cunning White man, Dr. King Shultz, who believes slavery is immoral, which is ironic since Schultz is a sadistic bounty hunter who hunts and kills men for a living. Nevertheless, his disposition towards slavery aligns him as the hero of this story, who acts a mentor and aids Django in his journey. Schultz not only buys Django’s freedom from his oppressive owner, trains him to become a skilled bounty hunter, tracks down Django’s wife Broomhilda, kills his wife’s master Calvin Candie, but also ends up sacrificing his own life for the freedom of Django and his wife.

Like many westerns, *Django Unchained* “latches onto a simple, stark picture of good and evil, and takes homicidal vengeance as the highest -- if not the only -- form of justice” (Scott). Indeed, if Dr. Schultz represents moral virtue then Calvin Candie, the proud owner of Broomhilda, certainly represents pure, evil incarnate. The audience first encounters Calvin Candie at his plantation estate, where he is cheering on one of his slaves in a brutal fight to the death. This practice is known as “Mandingo fighting,” which pits the strongest of Black male slaves against each other for the slaver’s entertainment. In another gruesome scene, Candie unleashes vicious dogs on a runaway slave and eagerly watches them tear him apart. Indeed, “the film never backs off from the violence of the period and the brutalities of the slave system” Clearly, Candie is characterized as an unrelentingly cruel sadist who epitomizes the inhumanity of the slave system. This representation serves as an antithesis to the kind mercy that Dr. Schultz

displays towards Django and a deeply uncomfortable reminder of our racial past in its most blatant and bloody form.

Ironically, much of Django's rampage against Candie and other slavers stems from a personal vendetta, rather than a struggle against racial oppression. Whereas Django largely ignores the torture of the Mandingo fighters, runaways, and the other slaves he encounters along the way, he enacts moral vengeance on only those who have abused his wife Broomhilda. By reducing his rage to an affliction against individuals, the film undermines his role as a racial avenger. "Django is not a cause of Black liberation, but an effect of a White paternal redeemer" His freedom is secured not as a result of his own agency but rather his purchase by a White man, in which he is legally rendered as property. Noticeably, the many other Black characters in the film serve as hollow, vacant objects lacking agency. Mostly functioning as background noise, they exist as caricatures that live happily silenced. They are simply the objects of racial hate and violence. They rarely interact and have no apparent connection to each other. "Though we have documentation of slave rebellions, this film operates within a cinematic history that has frequently presented slaves as victims lacking agency" Ultimately, the actual system of slavery is actively maintained and remains relatively intact in Tarantino's construction of the antebellum South.

Much like Michael Oher in *The Blind Side*, or the real-life symbolism of Barack Obama, Django represents Black exceptionalism. As Candie notes in the film, he is "that one in ten thousand" While Oher excels in athletic pursuits, Django finds his success in bounty hunting. As such, Django's character articulates a statement about Black masculinity in America. Interestingly, although Django exhibits a lot of violence, it is considered just. Vengeance, usually the exclusive domain of White men, is granted to a Black man and is considered legitimate by

the audience. Dr. King Schultz has benevolently bestowed an agency upon Django allowing him to seek a violent catharsis.

Although Quentin Tarantino's stated ambition was "to create a film the grapples with America's horrible past with slavery," he falls short. (Dunham). He depicts the violence that undoubtedly captured the reality of chattel slavery, however, the film denies Black people agency in securing their own freedom. As such, he undermines his own social consciousness, producing a text which is hardly progressive and instead actually reflects and reproduces the silencing of structural racism surrounding America's ongoing racial legacy. Ultimately, the message promotes a racial-logic that insists "White men as the primary liberators of passive, silent and non-White objects, in so long as such emancipatory actions do not conflict with the de facto social order" (Hughey).

Ultimately, the monetary success and critical acclaim that these films received make White savior films significant cultural productions, especially as a reflection of our culture's ideas about race and racial power during this era. These texts serve as key sites for circulating and reinforcing our ideas about the nature of colorblindness as a central racial ideology, in which racism is constantly negated by non-racial politics. After 2013, these narratives no longer seemed to carry favor, and were largely abandoned. Backlash against colorblind narratives due to the sensationalized media coverage of police brutality against Black men, the influence of the Black Lives Matter Movement and the anti-Black rhetoric of presidential candidate Donald Trump demonstrated the importance of race to understanding social inequities and power dynamics.

Conclusion

The Digital Age

"By definition, Black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions . . . high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus unauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization"

-Stuart Hall, *What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?*

The 2010s represented a new frontier in the digital age. Although mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter had been present since the early 2000s, social media at-large started to rapidly gain traction after 2010. Social platforms serve as an outlet for marginalized populations, providing the ability to voice dissent, organize social movements and call out White supremacist institutions and industries. Since its outset, Twitter has become a critical space for political commentary, news consumption and social outcry. On Twitter's 10-year anniversary in 2016, the site published a list of the most used hashtags related to social causes. According to the platform, #Ferguson was the most used social-issue hashtag in the 10-year history, while #BlackLivesMatter was third. (Anderson). From its initial appearance in mid-2013 to March 2016, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter appeared on Twitter more than 12 million times, while #Ferguson had been tweeted more than 27 million times. (Anderson).

The phrase "Black Lives Matter" was first originated in July 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watchman who shot and killed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black male. The case sparked controversy throughout the nation concerning the hoodie that Trayvon was wearing when he was shot, and "whether certain

attributes or cues signal danger in a manner that might reasonably elicit fear or concern of a kind that could lead police or a concerned citizen to engage someone with deadly force" (Obasogie). Fox News host Geraldo Rivera weighed in on the debate, tweeting that the "hoodie killed Trayvon Martin as surely as George Zimmerman" (Obasogie). Rivera's statement represented a popular sentiment: if only the victim had acted more respectably, he might still be alive. This argument reflects an iteration of respectability politics, which argues that minorities should respond to structural racism and injustice by "individually behaving in a "respectable" manner that elicits the esteem of Whites as a way as a way to insulate the self from attack while also promoting a positive group image that can uplift the reputation of the group" (Obasogie).

In response, Oakland based activist Alicia Garza wrote a Facebook status that quickly spread. In a post named "a love letter to Black people," she wrote:

> *"The sad part is, there's a section of America who is cheering and celebrating right now. And that makes me sick to my stomach. We GOTTA get it together y'all. Stop saying we are not surprised. That's a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. Stop giving up on Black life. Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter"*

Friend and fellow activist Patrisse Cullors reposted the status and highlighted the "Black lives matter" phrase that would soon become famous. The creators then reached out to activist Opal Tometi, who set up a Twitter account under the Black Lives Matter tagline. The message resonated largely with Black men and women throughout the nation who were outraged by the Zimmerman verdict. The movement insisted that regardless of any perceived non-respectable behavior, such as wearing a hoodie, Black lives should not be treated with deadly force. Thus, as an opposition to respectability politics, BLM maintained that responsibility for these violent encounters lies with those who kill Black bodies, not the victims. The hashtag and the

accompanying social movement accelerated further and gained national attention in mid-2014 in response to the high-profile fatal shooting of Michael Brown, a Black teenager, by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Shortly after, hundreds of people participated in organized protests throughout the nation. This gave rise to the larger activism-based movement that would eventually define Black Lives Matter.

Not only was the movement in response to the fatal policing of Black men, it quickly transformed into a broader social justice movement against post-race narratives and respectability politics. The campaign "eventually exposed Ferguson as a case study of structural racism in America and a metaphor for all that had gone wrong since the Civil Rights Movement" (Lowery). By calling attention to inequality in general and police brutality in particular, the movement highlighted the myths of colorblind discourses and awakened those who believed in a post-racial era. Thus, the Black Lives Matter movement, powered by the use of social media, brought to light the injustices that had been carried out in Black and brown communities for decades throughout the nation, causing each city to grapple with is racial past and present.

Further, #BlackLivesMatter is symbolic of a larger trend – the increased role social media plays in advancing all kinds of activist movements. #OscarsSoWhite is another powerful example of social media and hashtag activism catalyzing and influencing social change. In 2015, April Reign tweeted "#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair" in response to the all-White slating of Academy Award acting nominations. Before 2015, this dearth of diversity hadn't occured since 1998. In 2016, the hashtag resurfaced after the lead and supporting acting category nominations in 2016 were all-White for the second year in a row.

Initially a light-hearted hashtag to call out the lack of diversity among Oscar nominees, #OscarsSoWhite has since become a catch-all for diversity and inclusion issues in the film industry writ-large, both in front of and behind the camera. Whiteness dominates the film industry in more ways than one, and even as Black actors receive more recognition and success, the institution is overwhelmingly White. In 2015, when the hashtag was invented, the Academy membership was 92% White and 75% male, leaving few people of color with voting rights. During this century, only 15% of the top roles have gone to minority actors. "While minorities make up around 40% of the U.S. population, they are outnumbered two to one among film leads, two to one among film directors, and three to one among film writers" (Cox). Studio executives are also 94% White, and not surprisingly have a huge gatekeeping role in greenlighting White films. Thus, "even as the United States becomes increasingly less White (in its population aggregate) the notions of privilege, power and control associated with upper class status is still seen through the prism of Whiteness on the movie screen" (Seewood).

Some claim that the industry's reluctance to produce minority-centered films does not stem from bias or prejudice, but a focus on profitability. Hollywood executives are intent on making money, and therefore would be happy to produce non-White films if they could deliver profits at the box office. Yet, on-screen Whiteness is perceived as an imperative to economic success. Black films, those that center Blackness and situate Whites (if any) in the periphery, are judged as riskier investments due to the supposed racial empathy gap. This theory claims that the "vast majority of White people don't like Black movies because they lack the empathy necessary to identify with Black characters," which overwhelmingly affects the viewing experience and causes lower evaluations of Black films. (Seewood). Thus, non-White characters and narratives are constantly excluded from the mainstream market and relegated to smaller niche markets. Yet,

White characters are often embraced by minority audiences and enjoy almost universal cultural appeal. Minority audiences eagerly watch and engage with movies that systematically ignore and exclude them. In fact, only 20% of the films that Black people watch feature predominately Black casts. (Cox). Further disqualifying the racial empathy gap theory is the overwhelming success and appeal of Black films and actors, and even cultural icons, since 2016.

By 2017, the #OscarsSoWhite backlash and outcry forced the industry to advance more diverse films and incentivized the Academy to finally change course. The Academy announced unprecedented changes to its membership and voting rules in order to make the Academy's membership, its governing bodies, and its voting members significantly more diverse. Films like *Get Out*, *Black Panther*, *Coco*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Moonlight* and others "drove a multicultural gold rush at the box office as well as the Oscars, where a record 13 winners of color took home awards in 2019 alone" (Ugwu). Notably, *Moonlight*, a Black queer coming-of-age story, received unprecedented critical acclaim. In 2017, not only did *Moonlight*'s Mahershala Ali win an Oscar for best supporting role, *Moonlight* beat *La La Land* for the Best Picture title. *Moonlight* became the first film with all-Black cast and the first LGBT themed film to win Best Picture. Not to mention, the film won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. The box office success and ratings gold *Moonlight* received proved that alternative Black independent cinema directed by a Black filmmaker can successfully emerge into the mainstream, introducing new perspectives and aesthetics.

Thus, when consumers demanded more representative visual imagery from their entertainment, Hollywood delivered. What began as a comedic tweet about how the Oscars were "so White" started a movement that catalyzed a much-needed conversation about the absence of filmic diversity and inclusion that had encompassed the industry for decades. Three simple

words, contextualized within the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, incited widespread social commentary and forced a complete overhaul of an insular, $42 billion industry.

The prestige that films such as *Moonlight* received marked a substantial increase in the social and institutional recognition and acceptance of Blackness, which is commonly cited as a measure of racial progress. Further, several successful musicians such as Beyonce, Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Jay-Z and Childish Gambino became associated symbolically with Black power and progressive politics through their music, which further emphasizes the greater visibility of Blackness within popular culture. In her 2018 Coachella set, Beyonce, the first Black woman to ever headline the music festival, prominently showcased Black culture including tributes to the HBCU experience and homages to historic Black activists. Most recently, the success of the film *Black Panther* "spectacularly confirmed the profitability and salience of Black power as a motif" The cultural embrace and profitability of the Black superhero movie clearly illustrates Blackness' salience in today's cultural landscape.

Yet, not all attempts to promote Blackness have been so accepted, illustrating how audiences aptly distinguish between authentic and inauthentic representations. For example, the highly controversial 2017 Pepsi commercial which showed Kendall Jenner, a White woman, handing over a soda to a police officer in the middle of a protest, borrowed imagery from the Black Lives Matter movement which protested against the killing of Black people by the police. The brand was heavily criticized for "trivializing Black protest while banking on its aesthetics" and was quickly was removed. Clearly, companies as well as cultural industries aim to exploit and monetize Black imagery in this cultural moment.

Whereas #BlackLivesMatter, #OscarsSoWhite, #TimesUp, #MeToo etc. movements were used to call attention to rising inequality, the #MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement traded on anti-Black racism, misogyny, and xenophobia. “Like the tempo of Black progress over the centuries—one step forward usually accompanies two steps back—White supremacist and conservative opposition to Black progress also ebbs and flows. It never goes away, but merely heats up or cools off” (Harris). During the past few years, mass sensationalism of racial violence and White supremacy has increased, bolstered by the assumption of Donald Trump to the presidency. In 2017, a White supremacist riot in Charlottesville, Virginia evidenced the surge of neo-Nazi and racial hate that was festering despite supposed racial harmony.

So, how can we reconcile the contradiction of the increasing salience and prominence of Black culture and aesthetics with the resurgence of a political philosophy based on hate and anti-Blackness? Have we really achieved racial progress if it is just surface-level? Does the reality of racial oppression invalidate the widespread acceptance of Blackness on the big screen? Several cultural works have grappled with these questions. Childish Gambino’s music video *This is America* juxtaposes scenes of joyful and celebrated aspects of Black culture with imagery of violence and brutality that impacts the Black community. In one scene, ten members of a church choir are shot down, clearly referencing the shooting of Black church members by White supremacist Dylan Roof in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. The scene thus critiques the inherent contradiction of the celebration of Blackness in social and cultural spaces despite increased racial violence and oppression.

The Oscar-nominated film *Get Out,* the most profitable film of 2017, similarly reacts to this notion. *Get Out* is a racialized horror film about a Black man going to his White girlfriend’s home for the weekend and meeting her family. Throughout the narrative, the main character

Chris encounters routine and subtle racisms on behalf of his girlfriend's family, an ignorant but seemingly well-meaning WASP-y bunch. However, by the end of the film, the audience realizes that their racial prejudice is much more insidious than initially thought. Director Jordan Peele situates the film in what he calls "the post-racial lie," where overt acts of racism and racial logic are dismissed, but ultimately structure the basis of Black-White power relations. The film thus functions as an indictment of the facade of White progressive politics and a backlash against the cultural fantasy of post-racialism.

Later, it is revealed, that Chris' body is being auctioned off to their White guests. Echoing back to slavery auctions, the Black body is commodified and sold. From there, the White buyers can live out their fantasies of athleticism, sexual prowess, etc that Black bodies stereotypically embody. This scene epitomizes how the Black body is seen as valuable only in relation to Whiteness. In this way, the White gaze separates Chris' Black body from his mind, his emotions, and the political complications of Blackness. In this case, it is Chris' eyes that are valuable. When asked why the group had chosen Black people as hosts, his buyer Hudson, a blind White art dealer, says, "Who knows? People want to change. Some people want to be stronger … faster … cooler. But please don't lump me in with that; you know I could give a shit what color you are. No, what I want is deeper. I want your *eyes*, man. I want those things you see through" While denying any sort of inherent racial logic for his actions, Hudson maintains that he wants to occupy Chris' body not because it is Black but because of its ability to see. He insinuates that a Black body can have value but needs White control and appropriation in order to be maintained. "Even here, in the moments directly prior to his participation in an occult act of unthinkable evil committed upon an enslaved Black body, Hudson compulsively evinces the

central fear/refrain of post-racial Whiteness: he does not know about those other folks, but *he* is not a racist" (Jarvis).

In the alternate ending, the police show up instead of his friend Rod, and Chris ends up in prison. It is assumed that Chris is unable to convey his innocence and explain his victimization by the Armitage family because his Blackness assumes a sense of criminality and deviance, a reality that can be seen throughout the criminal justice system. "The moment the police car shows up at the end of this movie, we all know what's going to happen. The fact that we all know what's going to happen is the point. That's the catharsis," according to Peele. (Keegan). Functioning as an awakening to all those who have bought into the "post racial lie," this scene shows how the Black body is criminalized, making the ironic statement that the Black body can be seen as valuable to Whiteness in certain settings, but it is also demonized and policed simultaneously. Ultimately, the themes presented in the *Get Out* illustrate the inherent contradiction of the salience of Black aesthetics in popular culture and the sociopolitical context of burgeoning White Supremacy and the hyper-policing and criminalization of Black communities.

"Representation matters" is a common phrase circulating throughout the entertainment industry. Young people of color look for representations of which they can pursue and Black actors seek to portray humanistic depictions of which others can relate. While mediated imagery does influence audiences significantly, Black images themselves are not solely determinant of social progress of regression. Rather, meaningful diversity occurs when on-screen difference is situated in context of cultural specificity. It is evident that when pressured, studios do diversify their casts. Audiences must also demand that diversity is nuanced and complex. While they may not always "resemble the respectable characters so often proffered as the social cover for racial

integration and as proof that Black lives matter," meaningful diversity occurs when characters are multidimensional, identifiable and real. (Warner).

The framework of representation is heavily reliant on binaries of good and bad. "The fear of the effects of such "poor" representation has resulted in a set of binary, nonscientific, underdeveloped metrics—positive and negative—that constitute a nebulous catch-all system wherein the characteristics that define each pole on the spectrum shift depending on the era and the expectations of the audience" (Warner). Such a scale oversimplifies the complexity of Black life and undermines true indicators of progress. Pursuing meaningful diversity requires a shift away from these categorical evaluations and towards an understanding that representation is inherently contradictory and cannot fit neatly into categorical boundaries.

Overall, this analysis has illustrated how popular culture rhetoric articulates hegemonic ideologies and popular discourses of race. Throughout time, the construction of Blackness in public consciousness has shifted based on sociopolitical context and industry configurations. The media, and film in particular, has mirrored these shifting trends and currents. Meanwhile, film helps further shape audience understandings and perceptions of Blackness through processes such as agenda-setting, cultivation, and social construction. As a site of cultural production, film helps to negotiate racial meaning and significance. Further study should experimentally examine the specific correlation between racial representation in film, and other popular culture mediums, on racial understandings and political attitudes. This study is critically important because of the inherent political implications and consequences of representation.

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